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Introducing action research in the foreign language classroom

1. Action research as reflection on FL teaching and learning

Becoming a professional teacher is a longitudinal process. It takes time to acquire knowledge in teacher training programmes. It takes time to understand any classroom in terms of its intricacies and interacting variables. This is why there are visible differences between those who have just started to teach and those who have been in the profession for some time. Castejon and Martinez (2001: 218) observe that

[n]ovice teachers define good teaching in terms of personal characteristics of [the] teacher, children's involvement, and affective features in classroom interaction. Expert teachers define good teaching more in terms of lesson structure and teaching strategies [...] are better able to take account of context and purpose [...] make a deeper interpretation of events [...] generate hypotheses about the situation in question.

Becoming expert teachers requires knowledge and practice, hands-on experience in the classroom — but experience will only count as a factor conducive to successful teaching if combined with reflection and controlled and structured inquiry about one's own teaching, in order to become more aware of one's own classroom. Action research implemented at early stages

of teacher training will contribute significantly to making pre-service and novices into expert teachers.

It is believed that the professional knowledge that prospective teachers develop in the course of their training

tends to be declarative, abstract and conceptual. Therefore the training of student teachers should integrate conceptual, procedural, pragmatic and theoretical ideas [...]. Learning to teach involves developing various forms of knowledge that are acquired in different ways (Castejon and Martinez 2001: 128).

This volume focuses on the importance of introducing reflective teaching by implementing action research into the programmes of training pre-service and novice teachers, that is FL students in various teacher training programmes at universities and teacher training colleges, who are at the beginning of their teaching career or are still involved in the process of gaining their professional qualifications. Action research is thus seen as a way of developing their autonomy in the foreign language classroom right from the very beginning. It also seeks to trigger their need to experiment, create and test their own assumptions, hypotheses and ideas about their teaching contexts, instead of just implementing ready-made solutions and prescribed procedures in teaching.

It is important to introduce inexperienced teachers to reflective teaching by instructing them on ways of developing it by means of their own classroom research, which throughout the years of teaching English will make them more aware of the need to keep their minds open to reflection, and more willing to intervene and change for their learners' and their own good. Creating and developing this kind of attitude towards one's own performance in a classroom will hopefully help to develop and keep up a teacher's initial enthusiasm and positive attitude towards this very demanding profession and understanding that no change and routine will inevitably result in going backwards or even lead to professional burn-out.

2. Autonomy in a teaching context

Teacher autonomy meaning openness to change results not from a blind following of learnt prescribed classroom procedures and teaching methods but rather manifests itself in

a strong sense of personal responsibility for the teaching via continuous reflection and analysis and the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process (Little 1995: 175).

At the cognitive level pointed out by Little, teacher's responsibility both for teaching and learning processes relates to his/her individual and idiosyncratic professional development in the field of methodology. This embraces an updating of one's knowledge of empirical research in second language acquisition and methodology and trying out new solutions in one's own classroom. The following underlying assumptions can be made about teacher development (Richards and Lockhart 1994: 3):

1. An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching.
2. Much can be learnt about teaching through self-enquiry.
3. Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher.
4. Experience is not sufficient as the basis for development.
5. Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.

Little (1995) points out that it is affective control which is a factor conducive to development of teacher autonomy. It is often defined as teacher's presence in the classroom, elaborated on by Underhill (1993: 197) in the following way:

Underlying all valid subjective enquiry is the aim to become more aware of myself and of my manifestations as they affect others and those of others as they affect me, so that I am more able to respond creatively to situations out of choice, rather than react mechanically to situations out of habit. Awareness is the only instrument I have that can drive this enquiry.

Teacher autonomy is a prerequisite condition for developing learner autonomy. So no teacher can promote and develop learner autonomy without himself/herself being autonomous in his/her classroom by feeling a strong individual responsibility for what happens in the classroom (and beyond it) and for sharing this responsibility with the learners. This shared responsibility is achieved in a process of negotiation concerning:

- teacher's roles and learners' roles to be performed in the classroom and beyond it;
- shared decisions on the methods used, based on given teaching/learning situations (e.g. learners' needs and profiles);
- discussing the syllabus and making decisions concerning its interpretation, and

- teacher's decisions on textbooks and other materials depending also on learning objectives and learners' preferences.

Teacher autonomy refers to all the aspects of the teaching process the teacher is involved in at the moment as well as his/her future professional development consisting in developing the ability to reflect and thus create his/her own theories of instruction (Freeman 1992). Freeman emphasises the teacher's active attitude towards his/her own development and stresses the need to encourage and promote willingness and enthusiasm for doing one's own research, the results of which would serve the teacher's particular purposes in his/her classroom, which would go unsolved otherwise. It is action research which fulfils this aim (Gabryś-Barker 2006).

3. Action research: teacher's research

Generally, action research is understood as teachers' individual research. It is defined more precisely as research initiated by a teacher himself/herself. It aims to develop classroom awareness: awareness of teaching and awareness of learning. It is seen as an enquiry which hopes to eliminate a diagnosed problem and which is to result in change (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). As such, it has three basic features distinguishing it from academic research:

1. It is situational and context-grounded, by focusing on identifying and diagnosing problems and by designing and implementing treatment, finding solutions to those problems in a specific context for a particular group of learners in a particular teaching/learning situation.
2. It assumes cooperation between teachers and also, which needs to be emphasized, between the learners involved in the enquiry and the teacher.
3. It brings change into a classroom which ideally results in the elimination or at least progressive minimizing of the diagnosed problems.

It was stated earlier that the general purpose of action research is to contribute to reflective teaching and thus professional development of a teacher. The value of implementing it can be seen in the fact that:

- It brings information from the front line.
- Learners are sources of information.

- Research is relevant to the teacher's own classroom.
- It means learning about language learning.
- It means learning through research (teachers become researchers).
- It influences decision making (thus autonomy) (Edge 1993: 113).

Consequently, the main reasons for carrying out action research projects are promotion of teacher development and his/her autonomy, thus making him/her a more aware, effective and successful teacher. The validity of action research is of particular importance to individual teachers. Its results cannot be generalised, but they can be shared and discussed with other teachers and learners to involve them in the teaching/learning processes and thereby make them more autonomous through this shared responsibility for the implementation of change resulting from classroom enquiry (Gabryś-Barker 2006).

4. The stages of AR projects

In the context of training programmes, there are usually time constraints in implementing a course in AR, which will often constitute the basis for the thesis. It is necessary to design a course in doing action research that is at the same time efficient and yet, gives the student-teachers an idea of its basic objectives, data collection methods and develops abilities to present and analyse the collected data. This book aims to guide students who are trainee teachers working on their projects on the basis of AR methodology, i.e. research instruments employed in their classroom studies. It also offers an outline proposal for a two-semester course in AR for teachers, which can be followed at the BA level (*licencjat*) of teacher training.

According to Nunan (1992: 19) the AR research cycle as a basis for the course in designing classroom based projects comprises the following stages (see Table 1):

- a. Initiation
- b. Preliminary investigation
- c. Hypothesis
- d. Intervention
- e. Evaluation
- f. Dissemination
- g. Follow-up

Table 1. Stages of the AR cycle (based on Nunan 1992: 19)

Stage	Objective(s)
1. Initiation	— to discuss classroom problems — to select a problem area
2. Preliminary investigation	— preliminary observation of the classroom — to collect initial data
3. Hypothesis	— to review the preliminary data — to define the problem — to formulate a hypothesis/research question(s)
4. Intervention	— to design data collection tools — to implement them in the classroom (e.g. observation, treatment, etc.)
5. Evaluation	— to present (write up) the data collected — to analyse and interpret the results of the intervention — to make conclusions
6. Dissemination	— to present the project and its results to a wider audience (other teachers, learners, in a written form as a thesis) — to evaluate the project
7. Follow-up	— to continue the inquiry with possible changes to it and improvements

As an illustration of the above stages, I will use the example of such a course, which was implemented in one of the teacher training colleges in the region (discussed in-depth in Gabryś-Barker 2006). Its objectives were defined as:

To develop reflective practices in teaching.

To be able to diagnose a classroom problem and analyze it.

To develop the need to experiment in the class.

To develop a process of negotiation with learners.

To introduce needs analysis.

To update one's theoretical knowledge in a specific area of interest.

To be able to write a report on a project.

The course followed all the stages as defined by Nunan (1992: 19) above:

a. The initiation stage

The initiation stage of the project consisted of three types of sessions:

- lectures whose objective was to introduce the idea of action research to of difficulty area in a theoretical way through compiling information from all available sources: methodology books, journals, experienced teachers, their college tutor and so on.

b. The hypothesis stage

Equipped with all the necessary background information and being able to pinpoint the teaching/learning difficulty they wanted to confront, the students finally formulated either:

- their research question/questions, or
- a research hypothesis.

c. The intervention stage

Here the students were provided with the whole variety of research tools and methods for data collection, such as observation schemes, questionnaires, interviews, diaries, case studies, etc.; during:

- interactive sessions in which the theoretical background was illustrated with numerous examples of action research projects carried out by practising teachers by means of various tools — the above were discussed and evaluated by the students,
- a session on the mechanics of writing a research paper.

The initiation stage of the project was the longest since the students had virtually no experience of doing research and felt fairly insecure both about data collection, analysis and ‘putting it on paper’ — just to quote one of the students.

d. The preliminary investigation stage

The preliminary investigation stage did not seem to be any easier for the students than the previous one. It first of all through the initial brainstorming session focused on the most persistent or challenging problems the student-teachers encountered in their classrooms which either they were not able to cope with or were unaware of the possible variables or factors that affected them. Once the problems were defined and narrowed down, the learners started investigating the area. During the intervention stage the learners proceeded to the practical part of their research which took place in their classrooms. In some cases they did their research individually, in the others in collaboration with their peers, all the time being monitored by their college methodology tutor. In the course of the research, the students would meet either individually with the tutor or in whole-group sessions to share their experiences, doubts, worries and enthusiasm, which went on throughout the period of doing the project.

e. The evaluation stage

With time passing, the students became more and more involved in the research, however they were unfortunately working under time pressure

to complete their diploma work. At the evaluation stage the students were asked to report back on their projects in terms of the results they had obtained as well as to evaluate the importance and validity of the whole idea of novice teachers doing action research. The evaluation of all the projects was done by means of written questionnaires and informal interviews carried out by the methodology tutor with the students involved in projects.

f. The dissemination stage

The dissemination stage of the research consisted of five sessions in which the students presented their results individually. This was an especially important stage as the trainees could share their findings and compare their results.

g. The follow-up stage

The future will show what the follow-up of this first attempt 'to reflect and change' will be, but as one of the students said: 'I have to deal with my problems myself. In future I will do similar research to analyse other areas of problems'.

The design of the projects, their implementation and the analysis of the results were first met with some inhibitions and doubts, then with growing confidence and finally with great enthusiasm. Since trainee students are not experienced in doing research and writing up reports in the form of theses there were a lot of difficulties encountered in the course of the project. These are commented on below. It may be assumed that those difficulties will be universally true of any context in which students are introduced to AR. That is why I affirm that these comments to be of significance both for teacher trainers and teacher trainees. For the former they will bring awareness of dangers and may make them think of ways of minimizing teachers' and trainers' fears beforehand. For the latter, the comments of their colleagues who have already worked on their projects will make them aware how natural it is to doubt and make them able to deal with doubts and fears of inadequacy, especially for those who are still at the pre-service or novice stage.

5. Difficulties in carrying out AR projects at the pre-service level

The general feeling about AR projects among the trainees who followed the above-described course was that: 'Quite honestly, nothing in this project was easy. Everything was challenging, exciting, however, by no means easy'. What was felt to be relatively easy, according to the students was the availability of theoretical sources, which gave them a firm knowledge background to design the study. Apart from that the students found the research method and tools quite straightforward to design and use in their classrooms for the purposes of data collection since the course they were involved in introduced them to the design of research instruments and also offered sample practice. There was one exception, however, the questionnaire, which in some cases had to be rewritten a substantial number of times finally to be comprehensible, valid and ready to administer in the classroom and to the teachers.

The main areas of difficulty the students encountered related both to the content of the study and its form. On the level of content they referred to:

- formulating in a precise way a research question or hypothesis, narrowing the problem down;
- classification and presentation of data;
- analysis of data (a tendency to make too general comments out of too small an amount of data);
- implications of the preliminary data collection (defining independent and dependent variables);
- putting theory and practice together.

On the level of form and writing up a report on the project, the difficulties were observed in:

- structuring the research paper,
- presentation of data in the form of tables and figures,
- language register problems (for a detailed discussion see Gabryś-Barker 2006).

These areas of difficulty require special attention from any teacher trainer wanting to implement AR to training sessions. There is vast literature which will help in designing appropriate tasks for the training programmes and in overcoming the most difficult aspects of project design and reporting on it. However, these activities are not the subject of this volume, which focuses solely on research methods and tools. Knowledge of these is one of the components of designing successful AR projects.

6. Additional comments

Implementing AR projects in teacher training programmes at the pre-service level needs to be done gradually not only to avoid trainees' feelings of insecurity concerning their inadequate knowledge base, but also this unsureness about what AR is. The trainees' experience of research work generally comes from the literature presenting academic research as obligatory reading for their courses in linguistics and applied linguistics. The aims of this research are to develop models and theories and generally, allow for broad generalizations. In the case of AR, the aim is to introduce change in the well-defined context of an individual teacher's classroom, hence its results cannot be generalized and cannot be evaluated on the basis of their external validity. That is why one of the most important features of AR is making the trainees fully aware of the nature of this type of research.

In the chapters which follow, we introduce teacher trainees to the whole array of research methods and instruments that can serve as data collection tools in designing and implementing their first AR projects in their first classrooms.

7. Questions and tasks

- Q. 1.** In your own words how would you define research and discuss how it compares with AR?
- Q. 2.** How can AR contribute to the development of reflective teaching (consider each of the stages of the cycle)?
- Q. 3.** Considering your teaching experience so far, can you enumerate problem areas observed in your classroom?

Task 1. Choose one of the above problem areas and try to define the project, its variables and try to formulate a preliminary research question.

Task 2. Look at the list of AR projects below. Think how you would design your own project in the chosen topic area:

- How to increase learners' exposure to English by developing classroom English.
- How to organize FL teacher's work more effectively. How to become a better manager in the classroom.
- How to build learners' motivation in the classroom.
- How to correct oral errors not to inhibit learners.
- Disruptive learners.
- On the effective use of classroom space.
- My language of instruction.

Task 3. Imagine your teaching problem lies in the area of teaching grammar. Think of how you could narrow down this topic into a feasible theme of a classroom research project.

Additional reading

One of the major sources for students and teachers describing research trends and traditions and defining the major concepts in research in applied linguistics, as compared with AR is that of Nunan (1992) *Research Methods in Second Language Learning*. My article (Gabryś-Barker 2008) defines the concept of reflectivity and discusses its various applications in the classroom context.

The introduction to AR in this volume is only an outline of the main assumptions of AR, which is dealt with in detail in Burns's (2005) article "Action research: an evolving paradigm?" which presents the origin of this type of research, its qualitative features and critical evaluation. It gives an overview of literature on action research carried out in FL classrooms. Also Wallace's (1998) *Action Research for Language Teachers* is an excellent source on the ways of conducting AR. It offers a description of research methods and tools adapted to the level of mini-scale projects designed for a FL classroom. James' (2001) *Teachers in Action*, on the other hand, offers a wide range of tasks for in-service teachers, which are meant to 'bridge the gap between theoretical and practical teacher training'. Further reading sources on AR can be found in Appendix 3.

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Badania w działaniu w nauczaniu języków obcych

Streszczenie

Rozdział stanowi wprowadzenie do głównego tematu książki, którym są podejmowane w różnych formach przez nauczyciela praktyka tzw. badania w działaniu (ang. *action research*). Zaprezentowane zostały podstawowe założenia badania w działaniu, czyli dokonywanej przez nauczyciela w jego własnej klasie ewaluacji, mającej na celu usprawnienie procesów nauczania i uczenia się języka obcego. Autorka skupia swoją uwagę na poszczególnych etapach badania, a także trudnościach, jakie napotkać może podejmujący je nauczyciel, oraz sugestiach dotyczących rozwiązywania pojawiających się problemów. Podkreślona została rola, jaką badanie w działaniu odgrywa w nauczaniu refleksyjnym, a tym samym w rozwoju zawodowym nauczyciela. Jest ono szczególnie istotne na początkowym etapie drogi zawodowej, a więc jeszcze w czasie trwania studiów, oraz podczas pierwszych doświadczeń dydaktycznych. W okresie tym kształtują się motywacje i postawy przyszłych nauczycieli. Prowadzenie badań na tym etapie rozwoju tworzy podstawy ciekawości badawczej oraz otwartości na innowacje w nauczaniu, jednocześnie pogłębiając wiedzę dydaktyka dotyczącą procesów zachodzących w klasie.

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Aktionsuntersuchungen im Fremdsprachenunterricht

Zusammenfassung

Das vorliegende Kapitel ist eine Einleitung in das Hauptthema des Buches, d.h. die von einem Lehrer in verschiedenen Formen ausgeübte Praxis also so genannte Aktionsuntersuchungen (engl. *action research*). Es werden hier die Hauptvoraussetzungen der während der Berufspraxis durchgeführten Untersuchungen dargestellt, d. i. der von dem Lehrer durchgeführten Evaluation, welche zum Ziel hat, die einzelnen Lehrprozesse und die Fremdsprachenerlernung zu verbessern. Die Verfasserin konzentriert ihre Aufmerksamkeit auf einzelne Untersuchungsstadien, auf die damit verbundenen Schwierigkeiten und auf die Lösung von auftauchenden Problemen. Sie betont die Bedeutung von solchen Untersuchungen bei einem reflektierenden Unterricht und damit in der Berufsentwicklung des Lehrers. Diese Untersuchung ist zu Beginn des Berufswegs des

Lehrers, also noch während seines Studiums und in seinen ersten didaktischen Erfahrungen besonders wichtig. Zu dieser Zeit werden zwar alle Motivationen und Einstellungen der zukünftigen Lehrer gebildet. Die in dem Stadium der beruflichen Entwicklung geführten Untersuchungen erwecken ein Forschungsinteresse des Lehrers und seine Bereitschaft, im Unterricht neue Lösungen anzuwenden und dabei seine didaktischen Kenntnisse zu vertiefen